

Lasting Heritage to Limitless Horizons
Commemorating the Air Force's 60th Birthday
September 18, 2007

Sixty years ago—President Harry Truman set the wheels in motion that directed the establishment of the United States Air Force. It was a move that broke tradition. It was a move that changed military culture. And, it was a move that put airpower in its proper place—as the preeminent purveyor of the high ground in fighting America's wars.

Airpower had proven its worth to President Truman. He believed airpower was “essential to the preservation of our liberty,” and that the continued development of the science of air transportation was “vital to the trade and commerce of a peaceful world.”

What evidence led to this belief? The success American Airman had since they took to the skies in World War I. In 1918, with only nine months of combat, the Air Service delivered 138 tons of bombs and destroyed 756 enemy aircraft and 76 enemy balloons.

In 1921, Billy Mitchell, a bold advocate for airpower, proved airpower could defend our coastline cheaper than ships and coastal guns when he sunk the German World War I battleship, Ostfriesland, in an airpower demonstration. Scoring two direct hits with four additional bombs hitting the water and ripping the ship's hull plates, the Ostfriesland, considered unsinkable, was under water in just 21 minutes.

The Doolittle Raid, in 1942, was the first air raid by the United States to strike the Japanese home islands during World War II. Sixteen B-25B Mitchell bombers struck Tokyo and other Japanese cities. The raid boosted U.S. morale in the war effort and caused the Japanese to extend their defense perimeter.

In 1945, the Mighty 8th Air Force – celebrated its third birthday in a grand way with a 1,000-plane raid on Germany. By this time, the Mighty 8th had flown more than 250,000 bomber and 210,000 fighter sorties to deliver 518,000 tons of bombs and destroy 13,000 enemy planes.

The success of airpower in World Wars I and II as President Truman signed the Air Force into existence could not be denied.

The new United States Air Force quickly soared into relevance. Our fledgling Air Force defeated the Soviet blockade of Berlin with a monumental humanitarian effort called the Berlin Airlift. At the height of the operation, on April 16, 1949, an allied aircraft landed in Berlin every minute, with 1,398 flights in 24 hours carrying 12,940 tons of goods, coal and machinery. Less than a month later, the Soviets gave up and ended their 11-month blockade.

Starting with the Berlin airlift, Airmen have defined the moments of our nation's history over the last six decades.

Airmen broke the sound barrier, walked on the moon and in space.

Airmen fought Soviet MiGs and bombed interdiction lines in Korea.

Airmen helped bring North Vietnam to the peace table with a torrid bombing campaign called Linebacker II.

Airmen helped stare down the communist threat in the Cold War providing two-thirds of the Strategic Triad as the mainstay of America's defense.

Airmen executed a 45-day air campaign against the Iraqis that enabled a 100-hour ground war and a resounding Coalition victory in Desert Storm.

Airmen stayed when that war ended and maintained two no-fly zones over Iraq, and have been at war for 16 years.

Airmen sustained an air campaign to undermine the military capability of the Bosnian Serb Army who threatened and attacked UN-designated safe areas in Bosnia and brought international pressure on Slobodan Milosovic's Serbia to participate in the Dayton Peace Accords.

And today, Airmen continue to fight on all fronts in the war on terror. From the mountains in Afghanistan calling in precision air strikes and dropping relief supplies on postage stamp landing zones—to the deserts and villages of Iraq—to the skies over our own country—Airmen—on the ground and in the air—are ensuring our nation's freedoms and way of life.

The Air Force has truly earned its wings in its first 60 years. We've come from military balloons and World War I dog fights to the F-22 and the Global War on Terror. In our short but noble history we've established ourselves as the preeminent provider of Air and Space and Cyberspace capabilities.

As we continue to evolve and change to meet the challenges of the future, we'll continue to fulfill our obligation to protect America, deter aggression, assure our allies, and defeat our enemies.

Although providing a secure future for our nation in a dynamic and constantly evolving environment will challenge us to build on our heritage, we are confident the men and women of America's Air Force are more than up to this important task.

A forward-looking, can-do attitude enabled Airmen to serve our country faithfully for 60 years and provides the legacy that enables all of us to look forward to a safe, secure and bright tomorrow.

As we commemorate our 60th birthday this month, let us not only reflect on the foresight, courage and sacrifices of our past leaders and heroes, but let us also remember the courage and sacrifices of today's Airmen and their families fighting for freedom at home and overseas.